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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL'S AK PARTY CHAIRMAN GETS PERSONAL AT
MIGRATION CONFERENCE

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1. (U) Summary: A December International Migration Symposium in Istanbul provided useful insight into Turkish perspectives on the social justice and security implications of migration, with many Turkish concerns mirroring those in the U.S. An unexpected note was Istanbul AK Party Chairman Mehmet Muezzinoglu's recounting of his personal journey from Greek to Turkish citizenship in the mid-1980's. The symposium also provided a platform for Mission outreach; we participated on a panel about the legal aspects of migration and offered an overview of the U.S. experience. End Summary

2. (U) Turkey's Melting Pot: Home to a large and diverse immigrant (and migrant) population, Istanbul's Zeytinburnu municipality sponsored the December 8-11 symposium. Mayor Murat Aydin, deeming Istanbul a "United States of Turkey," called on governments to focus on social justice and foster a sense of belonging among immigrants. A panel of academic experts agreed, urging policymakers to look at the real roots of societal problems associated with immigration, and arguing that poverty, racism, isolation and a lack of recognition are what lead to crime and insecurity in immigrant communities.

3. (SBU) We'll stop 'em at the border: In contrast, Interior Minister Abdulkadir Aksu and Istanbul Governor Guler both focused heavily on security aspects related to immigration. Guler underscored the success of Turkish security forces in stopping undocumented immigrants from reaching Europe, adding that Turkey is working to improve detention facilities and fill "gaps" in the system. Minister Aksu explored the relationship between migration and terrorism, underlining the linkages between trafficking of drugs, weapons and humans. Turkey is cooperating with 52 countries in these fields, he said, pointing to GOT efforts to enhance passport controls, install optic readers, adhere to international civil aviation standards, and develop new Turkish passports as evidence of Turkey's commitment to cooperation. He praised NGOs, the Istanbul Municipality and international organizations for anti-TIP efforts, specifically mentioning shelters for TIP victims. (Note: His failure to draw clear distinctions between smuggling and trafficking throughout his presentation was not surprising. The difference between the two is murky for most of the Turkish public. End note.)

4. (SBU) A personal perspective: Participating in a panel discussion, AK Party Istanbul Chair Mehmet Muezzinoglu gave perhaps the most personal presentation of the conference, downplaying any academic credentials, but stressing his "practical and life experience." Muezzinoglu explained that he had been born a Greek citizen in Western Thrace in the 1960's, where 120,000 Muslim Turks were "left over" from Ottoman times. He shared several experiences from his childhood in Gumulcine reflecting his "emotional life" there: repeated visits to his family's store by state inspectors who levied fines for trivial reasons, and being taken to a jandarma station when he was eight, when the bike he was riding had a broken light. His father was required to retrieve him at the station and pay a fine.

5. (SBU) "I am fleeing from Greece": After coming to Turkey as a student, he married and had two children, but in order to immigrate permanently, it was necessary to return to Greece and enter Turkey illegally, he said. (Note: According to Muezzinoglu, Turkey was not interested in decreasing the Muslim population in western Thrace at that time, so did not facilitate immigration for those who wanted to leave Greece. End note.) In August 1983, right after Friday afternoon prayers, he paid to return to the Turkish border with a smuggler, hidden in a farmer's truck. He then walked 25 minutes until he encountered two privates on patrol, who took him to an intelligence post and later to Edirne. Ten days later, he learned he would be allowed to stay. He became a citizen three years later, in 1986, since which time, he said, he has been unable to return to Greece.

6. (U) US Mission Outreach: Addressing the gathering on

its third day with a talk on "Regular Migration Programs: The Example of America," we focused on the petition basis of U.S. immigration law, highlighting our history as a nation of immigrants, deriving strength from diversity. We stressed that immigration policy did not develop in a vacuum, but reflected political and social realities of the day, and emboff used his own family's background -- Haitian immigrants who came to the U.S. in the 1950's -- to cement the point. Countering perceptions we sometimes encounter that our immigration laws seek to promote a "brain drain" from countries such as Turkey, we also underscored that U.S. immigration law focuses on family reunification above all else.

17. (U) Comment: The conference was timely -- especially in the wake of the riots in France, which captured extensive attention here -- and provided a forum for discussing the tension between social welfare concerns and the security imperatives of controlling immigration. Though its focus was immigration, many of the discussions were relevant to one of Turkey's biggest "movement of people" issues, the migration of a largely Kurdish population from southeast Turkey to cities in western Turkey, and the accompanying stress on infrastructure and housing in cities like Istanbul. This issue will remain on the agenda as Turkey's EU harmonization process moves forward.
SMITH